

It's nothing less than a coup in the hills as a small band of growers and innovators cracks the code for producing the bean on the fringes of plantations that are known globally for their storied teas

It's time for some DARJEELING COFFEE



Coffee brand Altura's founder **Vikash Pradhan** got going after a worker at his cafe told him in 2013 about some coffee plants at his home on the outskirts of Darjeeling town. Relying on YouTube for knowhow, Pradhan and his partners roasted a handful of the locally grown beans. When it passed muster, the thought that they wouldn't have to rely on imports from the plains urged the group to try their hand at producing coffee themselves.

Umesh Gurung, a barista and certified coffee roaster, had his epiphany on a trip to the Nepal border in 2014, where he saw coffee being produced by the neighbouring country. With the geography almost identical, he wondered why they shouldn't experiment with the popular beverage at home. From that realisation a decade ago, Himalayan Cornerstone — the brand he retails online and at his Andante Cafe in Siliguri — this year produced 6,500kg of good coffee.



To the north of Darjeeling town, two spurs descend steeply to the Rangeet, the river whose snaky course forms the boundary between Sikkim and West Bengal. Rising from the left bank of the river on the Darjeeling side are the tea gardens of Badamtam, Ging, Singla and Vah Tukvar and the hamlets of Limbu Busty and Lapchey Busty. The coiffeured look of the tea estates is broken on the fringes by unpruned bushes — dark green, waxy leaves with wavy edges, adorned at certain times of the year with deep red berries.

Mention of Darjeeling makes you think of the volatile oils of the tea plant serenading your olfactory nerves and waltzing with your taste buds. But if that's all that the name evokes, it's time to wake up and smell the coffee. For the raggedy clumps spoiling the serenity of the tea gardens are coffee plants.

There now are many of these coffee clusters across the hills of Darjeeling, Kurseong, Mirik and Kalimpong. Strange, because Darjeeling has been, since the 1860s, a synonym for tea, the kind that satisfies the soul, attracts eye-watering prices and makes you preen when you offer it to special guests. But now these hills are home, too, for this interloper — a beverage that is as body as tea is not, as tinged with acid as tea is not, as different as a French press is from a china pot. The debate might only be on which gives off a more energising aroma.

Late Bloomer

Take a sip. Coffee from the land of tea is making itself heard and tasted, slowly but surely. From around a decade ago, when some people casually planted the seeds and found the cherries ripening to produce beans, indigenous coffee is now being sold in cafes in the tourist hubs in the region, in souvenir shops alongside packets of tea, and on e-commerce sites. Umesh Gurung, a barista, certified coffee roaster and quality controller from the Coffee Board of India not only offers his own Himalayan Cornerstone coffee at the Andante Cafe in Siliguri, opened in 2019, but also on Amazon and Flipkart. Sanjog Dutta, owner of Daamnee.com, which sells specialty items from the region, regularly dispatches hill coffee to customers in different parts of the country. Altura Coffee in Darjeeling has also grown from a small café to a big player, in relative terms, as has Himali Highland Coffee in Kalimpong.

Hill coffee is still minuscule, with a production of around a puny 10.5 tonnes all told against the 3.4 lakh tonnes of the bean that India produces, mainly in the south. Like foam and latte, the adventure in tea land boils down to the teamwork between farmers and processors/roasters. The coffee is grown by farmer collectives on their micro-holdings, often in their traditional homes in tea gardens. They have no means or expertise for processing the cherry they grow. That important task is left to the entrepreneurs who, despite lack of investment, have made a good beginning.

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PLANTERS' PRIDE: There are no coffee plantations in Darjeeling, just local households, most of them tea garden workers, receiving saplings from coffee companies, growing them and harvesting the cherries

almost identical, he wondered why they shouldn't experiment with the popular beverage at home. From that realisation a decade ago, Himalayan Cornerstone this year produced 6,500kg of good coffee. Induction of South Korean coffee expert, Young Gyu Seo, has brought in much-needed expertise in processing and roasting.

Serendipitous Start

For Rishi Raj Pradhan of Himali Highland, it was unplanned destiny. In 2014, he was given four Arabica saplings by coffee expert Llewellyn Tripp of Australia, who'd stayed at Rishi's homestay in Kalimpong. Owing more to curiosity than to any whiff of opportunity, Rishi saw the plants to maturity in 2017, harvested around 2kg of beans and, with uneducated guesses, blundered through the roasting. Encouraged, he planted more saplings. Today, his home plantation grows 400 Arabica varieties and 1,000 hybrid Chandra-

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giri plants. He produced 650kg of coffee this year. Amazingly besides regular advice from Tripp, Rishi's journey has mostly been experiential, his entire knowledge acquired on the internet and from reading the literature and conversations with experts.

Altura's Vikash Pradhan had an even more compelling reason for plumping for his own coffee setup. The café that he founded along with his two partners, Prayash Pradhan and Raman Shrestha, in the tourist magnet of Darjeeling town had a Lavazza machine. In 2010, it broke down and nothing they did could get either the machine working or the company rushing to remedy the situation. After going without coffee on the menu for a couple of years, a café worker told Pradhan in 2013 that he had a few coffee plants at his home on the outskirts of Darjeeling town. On a lark and relying on YouTube for knowhow, Pradhan and his partners roasted a handful of the locally grown beans. When it passed muster, rather eminently, the thought that they wouldn't have to rely on imports from the plains urged the group to try their hand at producing coffee themselves.

Even the coffee farmers took to the bean for reasons other than coffee itself. Sunil Subba, who heads the Darjeeling Coffee Committee

that oversees the efforts of over 70 households growing coffee, smiles when he says, "I am actually involved in the welfare of the poor tea garden workers, particularly their education and health. With the tea gardens in poor health in recent years, and the cash crops of oranges and cardamom failing frequently, I was looking for ways in which the affected families could supplement their income. Coffee came at an opportune moment."

Subba's group began in 2016, with some of them getting trained in growing coffee in Nepal and at workshops in Darjeeling. "It takes around four years for a plant to start producing fruit that can be made into coffee," he says. This year, they grew 3,500kg of coffee cherries with Subba saying that "from a handful of plants, now our members have 1.7 lakh bushes; next year, our harvest might go up to 8,000kg".

Way To Grow

In Kalimpong, where the local Gorkhaland Territorial Administration conceived of coffee to replace the outdated cinchona and utilise the vast holdings and the quinine factory infrastructure at Mungpoo, coffee growers had a baptism by fire. GTA, in partnership with the Bengal horticulture department and Directorate of Cinchona and other Medicinal Plants, distributed saplings in 2019, but the enthusiastic farmers found that the plants could not stand the dew. They lost a large portion of the saplings. Starting all over, they are on a better footing today with private processors and roasters buying their cherries.

Arjun Rai, lead farmer at Sangse Busty, says his group brought in 1,100kg of parchment, which is coffee fruit with the fleshy exterior removed. Parchment has to further undergo removal of a layer before its two beans can be extracted for roasting.

Lack of funds has been a problem, but the companies have gamely weathered the storm. Altura's Pradhan says, "While the bigger players elsewhere are solving problems with capital and investments, we are trying to find innovative solutions within our means." He talks about how they overcame the problem of the varying ambient temperature in Darjeeling between November and April, which affects fermentation and resulted in differing flavours across batches even with the same fermentation period. "Big players have climate-controlled rooms and vats. All that is beyond us. But we have devised our own system that does not cost much and also makes uniform fermentation possible," he says.

So does coffee made in a teapot enthruse connoisseurs? "Samples sent across the country and abroad have garnered rave reviews," claims Gurung. Daamnee's Dutta says, "Since the production is not too big, the costs involved are steep. That could be one of the reasons why things are picking up slowly, though I must say the quality of the Arabica is exceptional."

As for the future, Vikash Pradhan says coffee can be commodity or specialty, the former a low-margin, high-volume crop like in south India, the latter low-volume but high quality. "The quality of a coffee is measured as a cupping score and 80+ is considered specialty," says Pradhan. "This model requires intensive action and monitoring right from varietal selection to land, growing, processing and roasting. We are looking to have at least one cupping champion in the coming three or four years."

"Arabica coffee, as a crop, loves altitude but a single night of frost can decimate a plantation. We did some research and figured out that the latitude where we belong gives us unique growing conditions. So, as of now, we believe that we need to start labelling our local coffee as 'High Latitude' rather than 'High Altitude'."

Add attitude to that. Can't you hear Gurung, Vikash Pradhan, Rishi Pradhan, Dutta, Subba, Rai and all the farmers grinning and saying, "Bean there, done that"?

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Ever heard of a David who took on Goliath with nothing but a smartphone and a handful of Instagram reels? Meet Revant Himatsingka, the 32-year-old influencer whose digital crusade is shaking up the multi-billion-dollar packaged food and beverage industry: The lanky, outspoken youth from Kolkata has become a thorn in the side of food giants with his viral videos on excess sugar, sodium content, or harmful ingredients in popular products that have generated a broader inquiry on preservatives and additives used by the Indian food industry

On April Fool's Day last year, Revant introduced himself to the online world as 'Food Pharmer' — using a portmanteau of 'pharma' and 'farmer' to underline his belief that "food is medicine". His first salvo was a reel — shot in the dim light of his home with a stack of books to prop up his phone — exposing the sugar overload in Cadbury's Bournvita.

Looking to spark a health revolution from his Kolkata house, he found his call to arms against sugar quickly gain traction. Days after his video on Bournvita, he garnered 1 lakh followers along with a swift legal notice from Cadbury, the maker of the health drink. Calling his claims 'unscientific', the food and beverage giant forced Revant to delete the video and issue a public apology. However, the deleted video made headlines, leading the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights to send Cadbury a notice for using the 'health drink' label for Bournvita. By December, Cadbury had reduced Bournvita's sugar content by 14.4%.

Soon after, Revant created a reel to "expose the bitter truth" behind packaged juices. That earned him another legal notice, this time from Real's parent company Dabur India. His campaign bore fruit when Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) banned the use of "100% juice" labels on these products. His efforts spurred further changes: Maggi reduced sugar by 22% in its ketchup, and Lays switched to sunflower oil for its chips. Videos on Knorr, Nestle, Nutella, and Pepsi products followed.

But all the legal tangles — six court cases and a Rs 2-crore defamation suit — have made his family uneasy. "I come from a traditional Marwari family. I was told that we start businesses, not fight against them," says Revant, who left his job at McKinsey in US to champion health literacy in India. Despite his family's concerns and clamour that he get "a proper job", Revant has tenaciously held on to the cause, using what he calls "positive aggression" to take on misleading products.

A Diabetes Epidemic

While other influencers chase brand deals, Revant proudly dons a T-shirt declaring: 'You don't create a health revolution without making a few enemies'. A study published in The Lancet Diabetes and Endocrinology Journal and conducted by Indian Council of Medical Research last year echoes Revant's concerns — India now holds the dubious title of the "diabetes capital of the world". The country has 101 million diabetics and another 136 million on the brink, it says. Sugary

Kindly check the writing before biting

That's what 'Food Pharmer' Revant Himatsingka is urging Indians to do as he challenges the norms of the packaged food and beverage industry one label, and reel, at a time

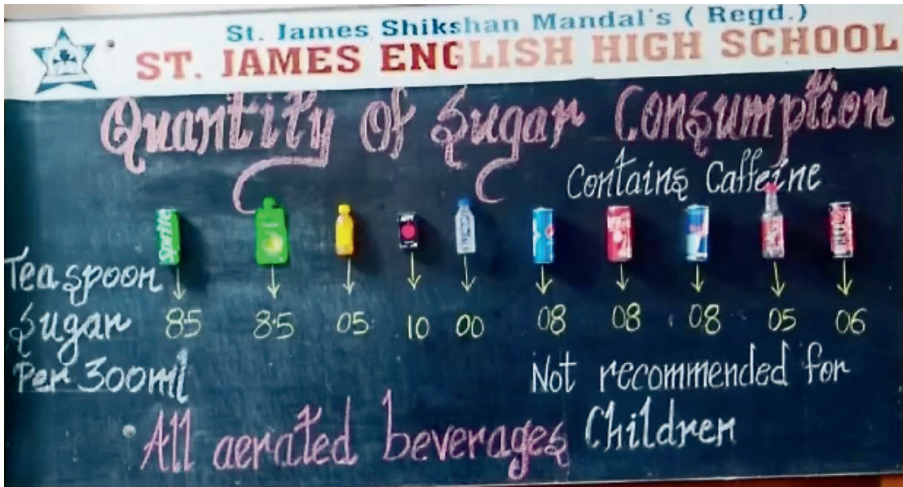


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drinks, processed foods, and high salt intake are significant contributors to this epidemic. "Indians are educated but not necessarily health-literate. A few years ago, I too was consuming packaged food without a care until I learned about its effects on the body," says Revant.

He recalls how his mother packed chocolate cream biscuits for his school tiffin while denying him chocolates. "Two biscuits every day is far unhealthier than chocolate once a week," he says, adding that sugar content in a product versus the frequency of its consumption should be examined. As we chat, his phone buzzes non-stop: 48 Instagram mentions in 50 minutes. "There could be more mentions, but I'll not know because Instagram shows me only a handful at once," he says, smiling at an animated Superman avat-



BITTER TRUTH: Scores of schools across India have put up 'Sugar Boards' like the one pictured here while the 'Label Padhega India' campaign launched by Revant (inset) has been endorsed by several celebs

tar of himself shared by a follower: "'Label Padhega India' has the potential to become India's second-largest consumer awareness campaign after govt's 'Jago Grahak Jago'," says Revant, envisioning a future where people instinctively scrutinise labels.

The virality of his posts have taken his campaign beyond the digital realm. It now boasts a 'Label Padhega India' anthem that has been endorsed by celebrities like Abhinav Bindra, Nas Daily, Dinesh Karthik and Terence Lewis, who have pledged to read product labels before consumption. Over 200 schools across the country, too, have joined the cause, creating 'Sugar Boards' to inform students about the sugar content in different products. "Knowing how to read a food label is one of the most important skills of the 21st century. Those who are health conscious, too, can be misguided at times. I believe junk food masquerading as healthy is even more dangerous than junk food itself," he says.

Experts Weigh In

Nutrition specialist Dr Umesh Wadhvani praises the effort that "Food Pharmer puts into exposing gimmicky branding" but disapproves fearmongering. "Our relationship with food is already troubled. Demonising sugar and palm oil without context isn't helpful," says Wadhvani, who advocates a balanced view of food consumption. "Sugar, by itself, isn't bad but over-consumption can be harmful. That applies to all food items, including ghee, almonds, paneer, chocolate, ice cream and chips," says Wadhvani. "All food choices need to be examined through a lens of quantity, frequency, diet and lifestyle."

Revant, who has studied nutrition at the Institute For Integrative Medicine in US, however, maintains he "never tell(s) people what to eat". "I only inform them about what's inside the products they consume."

Revant has got 2.5 million followers on Instagram but all he has for a team is a part-time video editor. His setup is modest: a mobile phone, lapel mic, whiteboard, and a friend's flat in Mumbai, where he moved from Kolkata in April "to be in the thick of things". "I'll soon have to join the cohort that is looking to find decent flats to rent in this city," he adds quickly. Living off his savings since his return from US last year, he is brainstorming ways to sustain his mission without compromising on values. "If I add value to people's lives, I will eventually make money," he says. For now, he aspires to partner with govt to promote nutrition awareness among school-children and reach a broader audience across different income groups.

Despite financial constraints, next on Revant's agenda is an online health school offering sessions on label-reading and more. His ultimate goal is to make nutrition knowledge accessible to all. "Nutritionists usually focus on people who have issues. No one is focusing on kids. I try to make my videos simple with a dash of humour. I also want to think of middle-class people who don't have the wherewithal to think and invest in their food choices," he says.

INQUIZITIVE

by **JOY BHATTACHARIYA**

- If you ascended the popular tourist attraction Table Mountain, which city would you be looking upon?
- Neither of the two countries that contested the first European Nations Cup or Euro final in 1960 exist any longer. One of them is the Soviet Union, which is the other?
- Which word for a variety of bee now lends its name to a type of vehicle used for military and civilian missions?
- According to numbers, which is the only country in the world where over 2% of the population is Sikh, the highest proportion worldwide?
- What connects the 1971 film Chhoti Bahu and the 1975 Gulzar directorial **Khushboo** to films Parineeta and Dev D?



- In which country is the College Scholastic Ability Test or CSAT so important that the local KRX stick exchange opens late, planes are grounded during the listening section and police officers are deployed to escort students getting late in reaching the test centres?
- The unit of magnetic flux density, also called magnetic B-field strength, is named after which Serbian-born engineer and scientist?
- If IIT Bombay was set up as part of a collaboration with the former Soviet Union, which nation collaborated with India to help build IIT Madras?
- Which YouTube channel recently took over from T-Series as the most subscribed channel on the planet?
- What is the name of the process of creating textiles by interlocking loops of thread or yarn using a hook-shaped instrument? It gets its name from the French word for 'hook'.

ANSWERS

- 1 | Cape Town in South Africa
- 2 | Yugoslavia
- 3 | Drone
- 4 | Canada, 2.1%
- 5 | All based on the works of novelist Tesla
- 6 | South Korea
- 7 | Tesla, after Nikola Tesla
- 8 | MrBeast with 279 million subscribers
- 9 | Chatrapati Chandra Shekhar
- 10 | Crochet